

Top Chef's Secret to Creating a Turkey Day Triumph

By Stephanie Susnjara

What do you like most at the Thanksgiving table? Is it the succulent turkey - or a side dish you indulge in once a year, such as great-grandma's sausage-studded jalapeno cornbread stuffing or your aunt's bourbon-spiked sweet potato soufflé?

One thing is paramount to Executive Chef Michael Cutney of Mount Kisco's Café of Love: Always prepare each dish with the finest ingredients available.

Fresh, in season and, whenever possible, locally grown is the mandate he sets for home dining and entertaining, the same theme he follows at Café of Love, the French and American farmhouse-style restaurant owned by Leslie Lampert, founder of the popular, gourmet soup-to-go shop, Ladle of Love, also in Mount Kisco.

Café of Love shuts its doors at Thanksgiving "so my employees can spend time with their families," said Lampert. Chef Cutney will spend the day at his mother's home in Newburgh, where about 25 guests will gather. His menu reflects Thanksgiving traditions and Italian-American roots: A table groaning with turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing and pumpkin pie, all vying for tummy space against lasagna, stuffed artichokes, Italian cheesecake and pastries such as *sfogliatelle*.

Although his mother reigns in the kitchen on Thanksgiving Day, Cutney pitches in. "It's hard for me to resist telling her what to do," said Cutney, whose background includes apprenticing at Cibreo, a top dining destination in Florence, Italy, and a 3 1/2-year run at the legendary Union Square Café in Manhattan.

When it comes to cooking a turkey, Cutney recommends brining it overnight. "Turkey can be a dry bird, losing about 20% moisture during cooking time," he said. Brining enhances the flavor, locks in the juices, and tenderizes the meat.

Regarding stuffing, Cutney said, "Make sure the bread you use is excellent quality bread you would eat on its own."

Gravy ties it all together. "It all starts with the caramelized, intensely flavored protein bits that gather at the bottom of the roasting pan." Cutney recommends removing the bird from the roasting pan while the drippings are still hot, so the brown bits can loosen more easily.

Café of Love may be closed for Thanksgiving Day, but Cutney and his crew will be back in the kitchen the next day, preparing signature Fall dishes un-

til the next season unfurls on Café of Love's menu, where offerings change eight or more times a year to reflect nature's most current bounty.

This autumn, Café of Love diners can sample Cutney's spiced pumpkin soup which he serves as the complimentary amuse-bouche. Flavored with toasted coriander, nutmeg and other spices, it is made with sweet blue Hubbard squash from Gaia's Breath Farm in the Hudson River Valley. The soup is served in a festive little cappuccino cup and topped with a heavenly cloud of foamy milk.

Handmade butternut squash tortelli, with brown butter, fried sage and *parmigiano-reggiano*, as well as seared scallops with saffron puree, frisee salad, smoked bacon and local

gala apples are just two other dishes that show off Cutney's passion for local, seasonal ingredients.

As a chef, Cutney naturally values a delicious holiday feast. But, he said, "The most important ingredient at Thanksgiving is family."

Café of Love serves lunch and dinner from 11am-10pm on Tuesdays-Thursdays; 11am-11pm on Fridays and Saturdays, and 11am-9pm on Sundays. It is closed on Mondays and will be closed on Thanksgiving Day.

Café of Love

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"It is important to use high-quality ingredients to achieve the most flavorful results. Please use wine that you would drink and bread that you would use for your favorite sandwich." – Mike's Motto



Executive Chef Michael Cutney of Café of Love in Mt. Kisco.

Michael Cutney's

Thanksgiving Recipes

Ingredients:

10-12 lb turkey

Brine:

1 cup kosher salt
½ cup light brown sugar
4 juniper berries
1 bay leaf
4 black peppercorns
1 gallon of water
1 garlic clove

Stuffing:

2 Tbsp olive oil
12 cups large-diced mixed sour dough, whole wheat, pumpernickel breads
1 cup chopped onions
1 cup Parmesan cheese
½ bunch sage, julienned
1 cup chicken stock

Gravy:

8 Tbsp or 4 oz turkey fat
½ cup All-purpose flour
½ cup white wine (your favorite)
1 ½ cup chicken stock

Directions:

A roasted turkey loses up to 20 percent of its juices, so I like to brine mine to increase the moisture volume.

Preheat oven to 500 degrees.

For the brine:

Combine all the ingredients and heat on low flame until sugar and salt are dissolved. Cool the liquid and place the turkey in a 5-gallon container (you may need to double your brine recipe to ensure that the turkey is completely covered) for 10-12 hours or overnight. When ready, remove from brine and dry completely with a towel. With your fingers, gently separate the skin from the flesh, being careful not to rip it. Rub the flesh with softened butter. Place turkey in oven for 30 minutes then reduce the temperature to 300 degrees for about 2 – 2 ½ hours, or until thermometer reads 165 degrees at thickest part of the breast.

Do not slice the turkey for at least 20 minutes after resting so the juices can redistribute.

For the stuffing:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Heat olive oil in sauté pan. Sauté onions on med low heat until caramelized, about 20 – 25 minutes, stirring occasionally. Combine the rest of the ingredients in a mixing bowl, add sautéed onions and lightly toss, keeping bread shape intact. Pour into a casserole and let soak for at least 15 minutes. Bake for 20- 30 minutes or until set.

For the gravy:

While your turkey is resting, pour off all but 4 ounces of turkey fat (drippings) from the roasting pan. Place roasting pan over your burners and, over low heat whisk in the flour until a smooth paste forms (that's your roux). Whisk in wine and stock, cooking for about five minutes or until thickened.

Happy Thanksgiving!